

How Early Buddhism Differs From Theravada

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How Early Buddhism Differs From Theravada

a handy checklist

bhikkhu sujato

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introduction

This is a handy summary of some major points of distinction between Early Buddhism and Theravada. Let's clarify what we mean by these.

- Early Buddhism is the teachings of the “early Buddhist texts” (EBTs), that is, the canonical discourses that were codified in the Buddha's lifetime or shortly thereafter, and which have been passed down to us in Pali, Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit.
- Theravada is the school of Buddhism established at the Mahāvihāra in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, by King Ashoka's son Mahinda and daughter Saṅghamittā, and which later spread across south-east Asia. It regards the Pali Tipiṭaka alone as authoritative.

Theravada, like any religious tradition, has evolved and changed over the years. Many of these doctrines are codified in the Visuddhimagga and other commentaries of Buddhaghosa (5th century CE), while others have developed down to the modern era. In this list, I am focusing on those teachings that are commonly accepted within mainstream Theravada as taught by learned scholars and practitioners, not with marginal theories

or folk practices. Nor is this about corruption within Theravada; it's about the beliefs and aspirations that good people have, not whether everyone lives up to them.

Differences inevitably arise as new conditions demand new readings of ancient texts. The evolution of ideas is an essential part of a living tradition, and today we continue the commentarial practice of delving into implications and discovering new interpretations of scripture. Nonetheless, since commentaries claim to elucidate the canonical texts, and since their readings influence the beliefs and practices of many people, it is important to critically assess these claims.

The aim of this list is to help students understand where the language and ideas of modern Theravada has diverged from the Suttas. Of course, the fact that something is different does not mean that it's better or worse. Sometimes things change in the letter but not the meaning; sometimes they adapt to circumstances; sometimes they expand things told in brief; and sometimes they change the meaning. I try to indicate where changes lie, and offer enough context to show why they matter.

At the end of the day, we must all be accountable for our beliefs, and you must ultimately figure out your own understanding of Dhamma. It's not for me to say what you should believe or practice. But when I started my process of learning, it took many years and many wrong paths to try to understand these matters, so I offer these brief notes in the hope that they will help smooth that path for some.

I make little attempt to trace the historical evolution of the terms and ideas. It's a checklist, not a thesis. Nor do I attempt to engage with the complexity of discourse around these issues, many of which have multiple interpretations.

I also do not discuss modern ideas such as “one lifetime dependent origination” or “jhāna-lite”, for these are found in neither the EBTs nor the Theravada tradition. It is worth bearing in mind that certain modern forms of Buddhism, with their dismissal of rebirth, Nibbana, and the monastic Sangha, have diverged further from the Buddha’s teachings in a few decades than the traditions did in millennia.

We should not be surprised that traditions accumulate changes. And if we gather them all as a big list, it sure looks like a lot. But don’t forget, traditions are also responsible for maintaining the Dhamma and making it possible for us to practice. And they also preserve many aspects of Dhamma that are not easily reducible to simple doctrines: a way of being or ethos, a sense of virtue, a reverence for the Buddha and his teachings.

Many of these issues are actively debated within Buddhist traditions, and indeed I learned many of them from traditional scholars and practitioners. We criticize only out of love and respect, in the faith that a living tradition is one that is capable of revitalization.

general tendencies

overdetermination of not-self

Not-self is one of the Buddha's cardinal doctrines, and all Buddhist schools teach it in one way or another. The Theravada particularly emphasized this teaching, and it seems they did so in competition with another of the ancient Buddhist schools, the Puggalavada.

The Puggalavadins taught that, while there was indeed no "self", there was however a "person" (*puggala*). For them, this was a way to reconcile the teachings of not-self with the experience of personal identity. The Theravadins dismissed this as a distinction without a difference, amounting to nothing less than a rejection of the foundations of the Buddha's teachings.

The refutation of the Puggalavada is the first and longest of the debated points in the Abhidhamma book *Kathāvatthu*, which shows the significance ascribed by the Theravadins to this debate. It is likely that the core of this argument was established by none other than Moggaliputtatissa, the ideological father of the Theravada, as a response to what he felt was an urgent threat to the core understanding of the Dhamma.

The Theravadin insistence on not-self, however, extends far

beyond this one dialogue, and at times it borders on an anxiety or insecurity. The entire Abhidhamma project, with its relentless analysis and uncompromising refusal to truck with conventional notions of a “person”, is infused with this spirit. Many of the specific points that follow stem from this overly defensive tendency.

the two truths

Theravada makes much of the doctrine of the “two truths”, conventional (*sammutisacca*) and ultimate (*paramatthasacca*). Conventional truth is the domain of such ultimately unreal notions like “persons”, “nations”, and the like, while the ultimate truth deals with the fundamental phenomena of existence (*dhammas*). This distinction applies both to the expression of the truth—where the Suttas are supposed to deal with conventional truth, while the Abhidhamma deals with ultimate truth—and the underlying realities spoken of, where the “ultimately true” phenomena are so by virtue of the fact that they have an “intrinsic essence” (*sabhāva*).

No such distinction is found in the EBTs. There we find the Buddha easily moves between discussions framed in terms of people and those in terms of phenomena, without having to impute any ontological significance to this distinction.

The fact that words have specialized meanings, and that what is true in one domain of discourse may not apply in another, is a normal feature of specialization and is not a characteristic of the Dhamma. In physics, for example, what we take to be solid matter is seen as energies moving in space. That doesn’t mean that the idea of “solidity” is wrong or lesser, it just means that it applies when considering things from some perspectives but not

others. In the ordinary world we live in, “solidity” is perfectly real: no physicist tries to walk through walls.

When the term *paramattha* appears in the EBTs, it does not mean “ultimate meaning” or “ultimate reality” but “ultimate goal”, and is a word for Nibbana.

abhidhammic systematization

The Abhidhamma texts serve many purposes, one of which is to gather the different terms and phrases found throughout the Suttas and show where they are equivalent and where they differ. While this is handy, it sometimes yields awkward and ill-fitting results, as it loses the nuances of the contexts in which the ideas are used.

Thus in modern Theravada we sometimes find doctrinal terms and ideas equated or explained in ways that obscure subtle distinctions found in the EBTs.

authorship of abhidhamma

While the Suttas are typically set in physical locations like Sāvattthī or Rājagaha, the Theravada tradition holds that the Abhidhamma-*piṭaka* was taught by the Buddha to his deceased mother in Tusita heaven, after which he would return to earth and repeat the lessons to Venerable Sāriputta.

This account is rejected by international scholars. The Abhidhamma-*piṭaka*, rather, was compiled by scholar-monks in the centuries following the Buddha, with different versions being created according to the perspectives of different schools. This conclusion, which is based on a wide range of unambiguous

linguistic, textual, historic, and doctrinal evidence, has held a consensus among international Buddhist scholars for well over a century.

abhidhamma over suttas

The two truths doctrine serves to deprecate the Discourses, which were taught by the Buddha, in favor of the Abhidhamma, which was developed in later centuries. It is common in modern Theravada for the Abhidhamma to be seen as the “higher teaching” and the Suttas as merely conventional teachings, which, if they are taught at all, are seen through the eyes of the Abhidhamma.

Note that *abhidhamma* itself is a problematic term, as in Theravada it rarely refers directly to the texts of the Abhidhamma-piṭaka, but rather to the evolved and systematized interpretations in the commentaries and later texts such as the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha. I myself was first taught directly from a modern summary of the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha and had to find my own way to explore the Suttas.

linguistic essentialism

The Visuddhimagga makes the rather extraordinary claim that Pali—by which it means specifically the language of the Theravadin scriptures—is the “inherently existing language” (*sabhāvanirutti*). If a child was brought up with no external influence, they would naturally speak perfect Pali.

The Buddha, however, regarded language as a set of conventions for communication between people. There is no such thing as a “special” language; the Buddha taught in the language that

he and the people around him spoke, and encouraged others to do the same.

This idea informs a certain fundamentalist attitude towards scripture, which sees the retention of the *letter* as the primary function of the canon.

loss of brahmanical context

The Buddha did not live in a Buddhist culture, and in the EBTs we find many examples of the Buddha in discussion with followers of other paths, including the brahmins. He always took a critical attitude, neither blithely accepting nor rejecting, but inquiring to understand. He showed himself willing to adopt beliefs and practices that he saw as good, while rejecting what he thought was wrong or harmful.

There are many practices and ideas in Buddhism that are a direct response to brahmanical teachings. Later generations of Buddhists, however, were primarily discussing among themselves, and the context tended to be forgotten. In such cases, the tradition found itself at a loss, and invented new explanations.

Note that in popular Theravadin culture, we can also consider the influence of Hindu ideas and practices. However, these are beyond our scope, as knowledgeable Theravadin teachers are quite well aware of these things and do not promote them as Theravada.

the spirit of inquiry

While modernist forms of Theravada embrace in theory the idea that the Buddha taught individual inquiry and realization, in

practice the tradition is still often based on rote learning and acquiescence to authority. To question elders is, among some Theravadins, regarded as an inherent sign of spiritual malaise and ingratitude.

The method of learning in the EBTs is much more based on dialogue, on question and answer, and on personal discovery. The Buddha not only said that it was okay to question and investigate him, he gave detailed means to do so.

meditation methods

Modern Theravada is highly invested in specific meditation methods, which all claim to be both authentic and effective. These build off the detailed descriptions of meditation methods found in the Visuddhimagga, which gives the most detailed and comprehensive set of practical meditation guidelines found in any ancient book. They include such familiar techniques as counting, focussing awareness at specific points, verbally noting events, noting the stages of steps in walking meditation, and so on.

The EBTs discuss the particulars of meditation in much less detail. Generally, they give an outline of the practice and its goals, while focusing more on the context and meaning of the practice rather than the mechanics of the method. The Buddha would typically teach a wide range of contemplative practices, and meditators would learn how to apply them in their own cases.

In this case, I think the Visuddhimagga is, for the most part, simply expanding and explaining what is found in the EBTs, but it can tend to an over-emphasis on getting the correct method, rather than being aware of the context and purpose of the meditation.

meditation retreats

The intensive meditation retreat is a defining characteristic of the modern Theravada meditation movement. Popularized by the great vipassana schools of Myanmar, it aims to give lay practitioners the chance to realize deep meditations that traditionally would be considered mainly for monastics.

The EBTs contain no notion of such an intensive meditation retreat for lay folk. Rather, the normal practice for dedicated lay folk was to take one day a week, undertake the eight precepts, and devote themselves as best they could to Dhamma and meditation. This is a gentle, approachable, and holistic way to grow spiritually in the lay life.

Monastics, including the Buddha himself, would sometimes go on solitary retreat for periods of time. But before doing so they would go to their teacher and request guidance, and sometimes they were told they weren't ready. It was considered dangerous to delve prematurely into deep meditation.

While the intensive retreat has given many people, including myself, a crucial kick-start in their Dhamma practice, it is not without its drawbacks. It's normal that meditators will get a high on the retreat and then fall back to earth. The extreme exertion invites over-estimation, and such retreats are full of people who convince themselves they have attained jhāna or awakening. Even worse, intensive practice with inadequate preparation and guidance can trigger psychosis, which is extremely dangerous. Many meditation retreats are run without the grounding in psychological understanding to recognize or handle these breakdowns, and meditators may be told simply to continue, or even that their psychosis is a sign of insight.

the bare minimum

It may be a human tendency rather than a Theravadin one, but it is common to see Theravadins analyze and argue for what is the *bare minimum* they can practice and attain.

Several modern meditation schools have been built on the idea of achieving stream-entry as the bare minimum for getting on the path. Their entire retreat structure is founded on this idea. Once you instill this value in people's minds, the focus tends to shift from "what can I let go of" to "have I made it yet?" This kind of worldly thinking owes more to 20th century materialism than it does to the Buddha.

The role of jhānas is especially problematized. Modern Theravadins are constantly arguing that you don't need them, or else that they are really just shallow states of meditation where one is thinking away while feeling happy. They will warn you not to be attached to jhānas, and argue that simply being mindful of everyday states of mind is "sufficient". This is far from the EBTs, where jhānas are a culminating stage of the path, invariably praised as profound states of mind which emerge from deep letting go.

A similar tendency is found in discussions of meat eating. The texts *allow* the eating of meat, and many Theravadins take this as a blanket encouragement. It's not uncommon that Mahayana Buddhists, on converting to Theravada, actually start eating meat. But the fact that the Buddha did not *prohibit* something doesn't mean we should do it. The animal welfare and environmental consequences of eating meat have completely changed since the Buddha's day, yet this is ignored because *we can get away with it*.

The Buddha didn't teach in this way. He encouraged his students to aspire to the best that they could. He set up the path as a magnificent, profound journey, never minimizing or apologizing

for the hard work that it entailed. Rather, he showed that on that path, there are steps that anyone can take right now. These steps, while apparently simple, begin the journey of letting go.

devotion vs. meditation

While Theravada as understood in the international arena is all about mindfulness and meditation, traditional Theravada is a devotional religion. For most followers, religious practice is visiting the monastery, making an offering, listening to some teachings, and doing some chanting. For them, these practices are ways of connecting with a community, honoring their family, supporting the Sangha, and doing good deeds that ensure a favorable rebirth.

While all these acts are found within the EBTs, the emphasis has shifted. Early Buddhism was a movement founded on contemplation and meditation, a way of realizing profound truths through understanding and insight. Devotional practices provided an emotional support and context, but were not an end in themselves.

This contrast is never clearer than when comparing the Thera- and Therī-gāthā with their later counterparts, the Thera- and Therī-apadāna. The former are accounts by or about the monks and nuns who lived in the time of the Buddha or a little later. They tell of renunciation, of the joys of meditating in the forest, of the struggles with desire, of the triumph of awakening. The Apadānas, which were composed a few centuries later, tell the legendary accounts of the past lives of often the same monks and nuns. Now their awakening is attributed, not to their dedicated pursuit of meditation and renunciation, but to a simple act such as an offering of flowers to a Buddha many aeons ago.

It is quite possible to reconcile these doctrinally. One can argue that the offering in the past set them on the path to awakening, while the striving in the present was only possible because of their past kamma. But if you take these texts on face value, there is a striking disparity in the values and emphasis. Within a couple of centuries, the path of meditation became an afterthought, and new texts were created to support the way of devotion. This disparity is still evident in the present day, with reformers within Theravada emphasizing a return to meditation.

buddha

The Buddha of the EBTs is more human and relatable than the exalted, godlike figure worshiped in modern Buddhist schools. To be sure, from the beginning the Buddha was depicted with a transcendental dimension, but this did not overshadow his humanity.

bodhisatta: one intent on awakening

Theravada, like all modern schools of Buddhism, teaches about the bodhisatta, the “Buddha-to-be” who develops his spiritual qualities over countless lifetimes out of compassion for all beings, with the aim of achieving Buddhahood. The Bodhisatta is said to have made a vow long ago under a previous Buddha.

In the EBTs we find no such idea. The term *bodhisatta* usually describes young Siddhattha after leaving home and in the process of striving for awakening. The discourses do, it is true, extend this term to Siddhattha’s birth, but this is probably a later development.

Rather than the usual sense of “enlightenment being” (Sanskrit: *bodhisattva*), it would seem a more relevant sense would be “one striving for awakening” (Sanskrit: *bodhiśakta*). These two

words have different forms in Sanskrit, but are the same in Pali (*bodhisatta*).

The clear sense of the EBTs is that what characterized the young aspirant was his total dedication to awakening in this life. In addition, compassion is never mentioned as part of his motivation for awakening; rather, it was what motivated his decision to teach after awakening.

the perfections

A key part of the Bodhisatta doctrine is the idea that once having taken the vow for awakening, the Bodhisatta pursued the systematic development of a number of spiritual qualities that culminated in awakening in the final life. These qualities are called the “perfections”, and we find different versions of these in modern Theravada and Mahayana.

The EBTs contain no hint of this doctrine, neither the general idea that the Bodhisatta pursued a path of development based on a vow, nor the specifics of the list of perfections. Indeed, when the EBTs do speak of the practices that the Buddha did in past lives—such as his development of the brahma-vihāras to the level of *jhāna*—they take pains to emphasize that those practices did *not* lead to awakening. This is in direct contradiction to the doctrine of the perfections.

Moreover, the EBTs describe in detail what Siddhattha did in the six years he was practicing for awakening and his motivations for doing so. Nowhere is mentioned the fulfillment of a vow or the continuation of practices from past lives. On the contrary, far from finishing a path determined long ago, Siddhattha is clearly experimenting and trying things out, not understanding

his path, and freely adopting views and practices that he would later dismiss as misguided. All of his own accounts of his practice emphasize this gradual and empirical process of discovering the path.

jātaka stories

Theravadins often learn the Dhamma first as children through the medium of Jātaka stories, the past lives of the Buddha. Such stories are told and retold, and have shaped art and drama throughout the Theravadin world. Jātaka stories vary greatly in length and form, but they each inculcate some message or virtue that the Bodhisatta cultivated in the past, connecting that with some event in the present, and often relating it to other people in the Buddha's life as well.

Jātaka stories have been acclaimed as the world's oldest, most complete, and best-preserved collection of folk stories. They are an immeasurable treasure of Buddhist culture. However they do not, with perhaps a few exceptions, tell the stories of the Buddha's past lives.

In the EBTs we find a few instances where the Buddha tells of a past life, and such stories must have been the seed from which the idea of the Jātakas evolved. However, almost all the Jātakas as we have them are folk tales that have been adopted into Buddhism. There are many tell-tale signs of their ahistoricity, for example, they they almost always presuppose a level of culture, language, politics, and technology that pertained for only a couple of centuries prior to the Buddha's birth.

For this reason, Jātakas are not included in the EBTs, and while scholars of early Buddhism appreciate them for their story-

telling and meaning, we do not regard them as authoritative texts.

Suddhodana as king

Tradition tells us that the Buddha came from a great royal family, and that his father was king of the Sakyans.

In the EBTs, the Sakyans were an aristocratic republic, who elected their leaders from among the leading landholding clans. Such leaders were known as *rājā*, so in this sense we can indeed agree that the Buddha's family was a royal one. But the model of leadership was quite different from the idea of an absolute, inherited monarchy that is implied by the idea of a "king".

the four signs

Tradition tells us that Siddhattha was motivated to go forth by the unexpected sight of four signs, from which his father had tried to hide him: an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a renunciate.

The EBTs, rather, tell this story of the Buddha Vipassī, set in a legendary time far in the past. Our Buddha of the present gave a similar motivation for going forth—to seek an escape from rebirth, old age, and death—but without the dramatic narrative of the four signs. In the overlooked Attadaṇḍa Sutta, he further explained that he went forth after seeing the strife and violent conflict in the world.

tathāgata

The Theravada commentaries give a wide range of readings of this epithet of the Buddha, which results in modern claims that it

means “Thus-gone”, or that the sense is unknowable or untranslatable.

It needs to be borne in mind, however, that one of the key functions of the commentaries was to provide substance for giving Dhamma talks, which they often did by giving multiple senses to well-known words. They aim to amplify meaning for didactic purposes, unlike a dictionary, which aims to eliminate false meaning. This is handy for teachers, as it gives them something to play with, but it does not always give us the actual meaning of the word.

In this case, the EBTs give a fairly extensive set of interpretations for *tathāgata*, for example, “as he says, so he does”. The overall sense is of one who speaks and acts in accordance with his realization of the truth, which fits the translation “the Realized One”.

omniscience

It is common in modern Theravada to describe the Buddha as *sabbaññū* “omniscient”, in the strong sense of literally knowing everything.

However the Buddha explicitly repudiates the idea that he is omniscient. Indeed, the very idea contradicts the Buddha’s analysis of consciousness, where awareness arises due to a specific set of conditions.

The Buddha did claim to possess a remarkable range of psychic abilities, including the ability to read minds, and to see where a person is reborn. However, the gap between seeing much and seeing all is quite literally infinite.

prophecy

One aspect of the Buddha's assumed omniscience is his capacity to see the future. Theravada believes that the Buddha could comprehensively foresee specific historical developments in the future, such as the arising of Ashoka and the spreading of the Dhamma, and even to the decline and fall of Buddhism.

The Buddha himself, however, did not claim to foresee specific events. He spoke, rather, of cause and effect: if people behave like this, then these results will follow. This flows from his understanding of the nature of the Dhamma, not from a mystical vision of the future.

The rare instances where he is said to foresee historical events are the products of later interpolation.

the buddha's travels

Various Buddhist traditions pass down the belief that the Buddha visited their country and made a prophecy about the flourishing of the Dhamma in their land.

The EBTs, however, make it clear that the Buddha did not travel outside the Ganges plain. Thousands of Suttas identify places in this region, always with a high degree of internal consistency, and correlating well with later records and current archeology. Not only is there no mention of travel to lands outside this area, but when such lands are mentioned, they take on a legendary and imaginative cast, showing that they were known only from rumor and report.

buddha images

The Buddha image was unknown in the Buddha's life and for several centuries after. The early tradition symbolized the Buddha with the Bodhi tree, an empty seat, a stupa, or a footprint.

For modern forms of Buddhism, the Buddha image is central to their devotions. Such images have an aesthetic and symbolic role as reminders of the Buddha's qualities. However they are often also imbued with magical powers, be it of healing, protection against violence, and so on. Such ideas are foreign to the EBTs.

relics

Relics worship appears first in texts composed a century or more after the Buddha's passing. They acted as a physical connection to the person of the Buddha, which in some way preserved his presence after his death.

The cult of the relic was, according to tradition, amplified by King Ashoka, who distributed relics in stupas all over his empire. The establishment of Buddhism in new lands was authorized by the transferal of relics. And today, monasteries and stupas typically hold many different relics.

But the keeping and worshiping of relics was not part of the Buddha's teachings. This is, in fact, one of the reasons we know the teachings of the EBTs are reliable. Despite the fact that the traditions very quickly adopted the worship of relics, they did not attempt to justify this practice by altering or adding any texts to the early canon. Rather, they created new texts to authorize the new practices; or at most, they added easily-identified addenda

to older texts, such as the closing verses of the Mahaparinibbana Sutta.

Relics are easy to fake, and the whole realm of relics has always been full of con artists and grifters. There is no historical evidence that any of the relics worshipped today have any real connection to the Buddha or his disciples, with the exception of a very few relics that have been unearthed in 20th century archeological digs, such as the Buddha relics of Kapilavatthu at the Delhi Museum, or those of Sariputta and Moggallana at the Maha Bodhi Society.

When monks are digging up the toilets of supposed arahants to retrieve the “relics”, it’s a sign that something has gone badly wrong. The Dhamma does not inhere in any physical object; it is manifested through mind and deed.

dhamma

mind objects

Modern Theravada speaks of “objects”, an English rendering of the Pali term *ārammaṇa*. This is especially common when speaking of the sixth sense base, that of which the mind is aware. In the EBTs this is *dhamma*, in modern Theravada it is often *dharmārammaṇa*, translated as “mind object”.

However, *ārammaṇa* is never found in the sense of “object” in the EBTs. It is always used in the sense of “reliance, support”. Nor is there any other term used in this way; I translated the entire four Pali nikāyas without ever once using the concept of a “mind object”.

Philosophically, an “object” is problematic because it implies something that exists “objectively”. What could an “object” be, if not something that exists “out there” independent of the observing mind? The purpose of the Buddha’s teachings on cognition is to undermine any such conception, speaking only of experiences that arise in a process of mutual interdependence.

See also *sabhāva* or “inherent existence”.

mind moments

Theravada has a concrete theory of time, based on the idea of “mind moments” (*cittakkhaṇa*). These are essentially atomic units of time, the smallest divisible periods of time possible. This theory was common among many of the schools of ancient Buddhism, although they differed in details such as how many “sub-moments” each moment may contain. In Theravada a moment is said to be a minuscule fraction of a flash of lightning.

The EBTs contain no such theory, and do not mention “mind moments” at all. While the EBTs do not elucidate an explicit theory of time, we can see from the way time is treated that there is no essential substratum from which change is derived. Rather, the EBTs treat each dimension of time as equally “real” and significant. The cycle of the aeons, the rise and fall of civilizations, the span of a human life, or the passing of a thought are all aspects of change, all are equally impermanent, and there is no attempt to explain them in a reductive manner by saying that “real” change happens at one level, of which the others are manifestations.

This is apparent in the stories of insight. Whereas modern Theravada wants to locate insight at the level of observation of mind moments, for the EBTs time may be observed as changing on any level: water draining away, the frailty of human life, the cosmic impermanence of the elements. What matters is not seeing a particular vision of “ultimate reality”, but letting go of the idea of permanence.

For this reason, I would argue that for the EBTs, time is a concept that is derived from our memory of changes in consciousness and our desire for future consciousness. The scope of time is the scope of desire.

present moment

Being in the “present moment” is such a common trope in modern meditation that it comes as surprise to find that the Buddha never spoke of the “present moment” at all. He spoke of the “present” (*paccuppanna*), which is a more general notion, not tied to a specific momentary theory of time like the “present moment” (*paccuppannakkhāṇa*). David Kalupahana memorably said the ‘present moment’ was like walking a tightrope, while the “present” was broader, like riding a camel.

This difference, while seemingly abstruse, has a major effect on how people approach meditation. Do we strain to focus on a very narrow and specific view of reality, next to which all others are incorrect? Or do we simply remain in the “present”, which is where we have been all along?

deathbed kamma

Most Theravadins are very concerned about the kamma that is made at the time of death. They believe that the last “thought moment” can determine the place of rebirth.

However this teaching is not only absent from the EBTs, it contradicts the fundamental idea of kamma. It is *moral intention*, not a passing thought, that shapes rebirth. Most thoughts have little ethical weight, and this is especially the case if someone is weak and medicated on their deathbed.

For the EBTs, rebirth is always determined by some act of moral significance: giving, undertaking precepts, having insight into the truth. Of course, this may be a purely mental act, but it must be a mental act of moral significance.

There are a couple of examples of effective deathbed kamma in the EBTs, but these are exceptional cases. In one, the corrupt tax collector Dhanañjani is converted from his wicked ways on his deathbed, and achieves genuine repentance for a life ill-lived. In another, if a warrior is leaping into battle with a mind of hate and thoughts of killing, and they are killed in that moment, they will go to a bad rebirth.

Normal deaths are not like this, and most people are not doing ethically significant acts at the time of death. Their rebirth will, for the most part, be determined by the deeds they have done throughout their life. In fact, this understanding is maintained in the Abhidhamma tradition, which describes the different kinds of kamma that can predominate at the time of death. Practically, though, the death-proximate kamma is strongly emphasized.

Obviously it is a good thing to support those who are dying, and help them to maintain a wholesome mind state. But we need not fear that a single stray thought will propel us to a bad rebirth. As the Buddha said to his relative Mahānāma, “Do not fear, do not fear!” Someone who has lived a good life will have a good rebirth.

the in-between state

Theravada teaches that when one life ends, another begins without interval. There is no period of transition between one and the other. Rather, the last “mind moment” in the previous life is immediately followed by the so-called “re-linking consciousness” (*paṭisandhi viññāṇa*), a mind moment that connects one life to the next.

However, a period of transition or “in-between state” (*antarabhava*), was taught by most of the ancient schools of Bud-

dhism. It remains a popular idea in folk Theravada despite its lack of official endorsement.

In this case, it seems the majority got it right, for there are a number of passages in the Suttas that clearly speak of a process between one life and another. For example, certain non-returners (those on the second-last stage of awakening) are said to die while not fully enlightened, and to realize Nibbana “in-between” before taking rebirth.

Rather than a “re-linking consciousness” the EBTs speak of the “stream of consciousness” or the “onflowing consciousness” that flows from one life to the next. Rebirth is a process, like leaving a house, walking down the street, and entering another house.

contemplation of the ugliness of women’s bodies

One of the meditations found in all forms of Buddhism is the contemplation of *asubha*, the “ugliness” of the body. It is intended to develop a sense of detachment from the body, so that we are no longer infatuated by it.

In the EBTs, this is done by contemplating one’s own body (*imameva kāyo*), or by comparing one’s own body with another’s, typically a decomposing corpse, in the understanding that “this body is also of that same nature”. The external body is not gendered, and examples of nuns pursuing these practices show that it was never meant as a gendered contemplation.

Later Buddhism, including Theravada, commonly objectified the external object of revulsion as a woman’s body, and focussed the practice on overcoming sexual desire among monks. While overcoming sexual desire is part of the practice from the begin-

ning, it was originally by seeing the nature of one's own body, not by externalizing the ugliness into the bodies of women.

sabhāva: inherent essence

Just as the later schools developed an atomic theory of time via reductive analysis, they also developed an atomic theory of being (“ontology”). And again, this theory was found commonly in the ancient schools, with the Theravada adopting its own interpretation.

The idea is that the world may be reduced to a finite and classifiable set of discrete “phenomena” (*dhammas*), which are listed in the Abhidhamma texts and commentaries. These phenomena are irreducible building blocks of reality, and exist independently of the perceiving mind. As Ledi Sayadaw, perhaps the most influential founder of modern Theravada, put it in *The Manual of the Four Noble Truths*, elements with *sabhāva* “never act according to the wishes of beings, but function according to their respective natures”. These ultimately existing realities included not just the conditioned phenomena defined in the Abhidhamma, but also Nibbana.

The EBTs contain no such idea, and do not articulate an explicit ontological theory. Being, like time, is treated as a relative and interdependent process, without recourse to an ultimate substratum.

Nibbana is described as freedom from suffering and is not ascribed an ontological reality. Where the reality of Nibbana is affirmed, it is immediately affirmed as a series of negations: it is the “not-born”, the “not-conditioned”.

the varieties of samādhi

Modern Theravada, especially the 20th century Vipassana schools, emphasize the development of what they call “samādhi” in various forms that are not found in the EBTs.

- “Momentary” (*khaṇika*) samādhi is the mindful awareness of changing mind-body phenomena in the present moment.
- “Threshold” (*upacāra*) samādhi is a grace period immediately before jhāna, where the mind is free of hindrances but not yet fully absorbed. It is sometimes extended to cover any state outside jhāna and free of hindrances.
- “Supermundane” (*lokuttara*) samādhi is the state of mind of one who is actively in the process of realizing the paths and fruits of the stages of awakening. It was originally mentioned in the Abhidhamma, and later said to be only a few mind-moments.

All of these have been invoked by later theorists to fulfill the criterion of “right samādhi” in the noble eightfold path instead of jhānas.

In the EBTs the samādhi that is essential for the path is always defined as the four jhānas. Samādhi in the EBTs is a profound unification of mind that is the result of a dedicated process of letting go and spiritual development. Occasionally, it is true, samādhi is found in a slightly broader sense, but these cases are never central to the path.

dry insight

Perhaps the most influential doctrine of modernist Buddhist is the idea of “dry insight”, that one may practice to realize awakening without the jhānas. A soft form of this doctrine argues that one may attain stream-entry, the first stage of awakening, while hard-core insight doctrine extends this all the way to full perfection (*arahattā*). This doctrine draws upon ideas developed in the commentary—such as the various kinds of samādhi outlined above—but it only crystallized as a mainstream, definitive doctrine among certain 20th century Burmese teachers.

There is no doctrine of dry insight in the EBTs. Every formulation of the path includes samādhi, and wherever samādhi is defined in a key doctrinal context, it is always the four jhānas. One who “enters the stream” is one who has completed all eight factors of the noble eightfold path, including jhānas.

To remove such a central, mainstream part of the path is an unprecedented innovation in doctrine that also affects the meditative practice of millions of people. It is worth noting that in the mid-20th century, it was received as a highly controversial idea, and was strongly opposed by many senior monks. And they were right: the Buddha taught a balanced and integrated path where serene and joyful emotions (*samatha*) go hand in hand with penetrating discernment (*vipassanā*).

insight meditation

Underlying the idea that insight alone is sufficient for awakening is the idea that “insight meditation” (*vipassanā bhāvanā*) is a

particular kind of meditation distinct from “serenity meditation” (*samatha bhāvanā*).

In the EBTs, serenity and insight are not different kinds of meditation, but different qualities of mind that are developed through meditation. Each of them, in balance and harmony, supports a meditator to find freedom. All meditations lead to peace of mind and deepening of wisdom, and while we might emphasize certain aspects through different practices, they are not different things.

the four *paṭisambhidās*

The first of the comprehensive Theravadin books of the path is called the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, and its title alone raises the *paṭisambhidās* from an obscure and occasional teaching in the Suttas to a core aspect of Theravadin self-identity.

The *paṭisambhidās* are an unusual set of teachings that treat various aspects of textual analysis and understanding: the text, its meaning, the terminology, and the expression of a teaching in spontaneous discourse. They occur rarely in the EBTs, but originally they must have referred to certain faculties that facilitated the effective analysis and teaching of the Dhamma.

The Theravada came to see these properties as qualities of certain arahants, who were able to not just realize these teachings, but to intuitively understand the correct linguistic expression of them in Pali. Thus one possessing the *paṭisambhidās* could look at a Pali phrase and immediately know if the grammar was correct, even if they had never studied the language. This supported the Theravadin claim to preserve the Tipitaka in its *letter* as opposed

to the corrupted texts of other traditions, from which they had parted ways for this very reason.

Today, teachers claiming to have realized the *paṭisambhidās* offer a range of bizarre and ungrounded readings of Pali texts, relishing their opposition to the traditions of commentary and grammar. Such interpretations are rejected by mainstream Theravada, but it paved the way for them with the doctrine of the *paṭisambhidās*.

the negative consequences of kamma

Popular Theravada often claims that certain consequences in this life must have been created by bad kamma in past lives. These ideas are common in Theravada countries, though they rarely find their way into international discourse. Among the effects attributed to bad kamma are disability, poverty, being reborn as a woman, or being LGBTQI+.

This doctrine has a range of harmful effects, as it invites a dismissal of the suffering experienced by those who are vulnerable.

The EBTs say that making poor ethical choices will create conditions of suffering in the next life. Normally this is talked about in terms of the realm into which one will be reborn. Now, rebirth in the human realm is always a result of good kamma, but nevertheless, the EBTs sometimes talk about experiences of suffering in the human realm as a result of kamma. These include poverty, health, status, intelligence, and beauty, but do *not* include gender or sexuality. There is nothing in the EBTs that indicate the Buddha felt that these latter things were negative consequences that required explanations in terms of kamma.

The EBTs emphasize that conditions in the human realm are caused by a variety of factors, one of which may be kamma. The Buddha focused on ethical choices and consequences because he was an ethical and spiritual teacher, not a doctor or a social advocate. That doesn't mean he dismissed external factors. For example, in discussing the causes of illness the Buddha identified multiple causes of disease, only one of which is past kamma. The Buddha himself experienced illness which he attributed to his meal, not to past kamma. Or take the case of poverty, where the Buddha pointed out that it may be created by the greed of kings and alleviated by generous social support.

The popular belief is based on the logical mistake that *if A then B* implies *if B then A*. The purpose of the teaching of kamma is to show us that harmful choices have consequences in this life or the future. That does not, however, mean that all harmful consequences are caused by kamma.

Kamma, properly understood, is a foundation for compassion, because we understand that no matter what travails or suffering a person may undergo, we too can end up the same way. What matters is not what we have done in the past, but how we choose to respond, here and now, to the suffering of ourselves and others.

reductionist not-self

Theravada argues for the not-self doctrine by reducing the conventional to the ultimate. What we think of as a person is, in fact, nothing more than the five aggregates. Seeing this, we will understand not-self and let go of attachment.

For the EBTs, on the other hand, it is precisely the five aggregates that are taken as self. Indeed, it seems as if they were

originally developed as a scheme for classifying self theories. If you had tried to argue, “What you take as self is nothing more than the aggregates” you would be met with, “Yes, exactly, that is my self.”

Rather than reducing the self to the aggregates, the Buddha’s approach was to argue that what is taken as self—the aggregates—does not have the characteristics of a self. Since in our experience here and now, form, feeling, perception and the rest are impermanent, then how can they be a self, which must be eternal?

The difference is a subtle one. Imagine someone had bought a new car. They are very attached to it, so being a good friend you take it upon yourself to disillusion them. “The car’s nice, but you know, it’s really nothing more than a collection of parts, right? We just call it a ‘car’ when the parts are assembled. You can take the engine right out if you like.” “Yeah, and what an engine it is! That 4.0L V8 rumble, wow, it just feels so good.” “And, I dunno, the wheels, they’re just parts, they help it to roll along.” “Sure, and don’t those low-profile rims look mega cool?” We can get attached to the parts just as we can to the whole.

Analysis into parts can be a part of a strategy to overcome attachment, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient. Some people can let go of attachments by contemplating the whole, seeing the course that their lives take. Others might see the parts and immediately let go. These are approaches that can be useful, but it is not the case that reducing wholes to ultimate constituents is an essential part of insight. Rather, breaking wholes down into smaller parts helps us see how each of the parts is impermanent, and how the whole is even less stable, being created out of many impermanent parts.

To be fair, the Visuddhimaga acknowledges this and agrees that some people get enlightened on the basis of conventional truth, others through ultimate truth. But this is often passed over in modern Theravada.

nāmarūpa as “mind and body”

In Theravada it is common to hear the Pali phrase *nāmarūpa* defined as “mind and body”. *Nāma* is said to be made up of the four immaterial aggregates, including consciousness.

The EBTs define *nāma* as “feeling, perception, intention, contact, and attention”, thus specifically excluding consciousness. Note, however, that there is a variety of treatments within the EBTs here. Sometimes we also find a definition that includes consciousness. However I would regard this as a nascent Abhidhammic influence.

It is worth noting that the Visuddhimagga follows the early interpretation in the context of dependent origination.

In the EBTs, there is no dualistic concept of “mind and body”. Rather, mental and physical phenomena are experienced in relation with each other. Analysis aims to clarify this relation, but it does not begin by separating mind and body.

For example, when the aggregates are analyzed, “form” is not separated from the four immaterial aggregates. Rather, it is consciousness that is distinguished, and against which all the others stand.

nimitta: the basis for meditation

The Visuddhimagga describes in detail the development of the so-called *nimitta* in meditation. The *nimitta* is a perception, typically seen as a light, that arises and stabilizes as the meditator becomes free of hindrances. This terminology has become entrenched in modern meditation discourse.

The EBTs, however, never use the word *nimitta* in this way. *Nimitta* is rather a curious term that straddles the range of a “sign, hint, indication” that something is to come, and the “cause” of that thing. The *nimitta* of the sunrise is the brightening of the night sky, just as the *nimitta* of the eightfold path is right view.

In meditation, *nimitta* refers to a certain quality or aspect of experience which, when attended to, promotes the growth of similar or related qualities. Thus paying attention to the “sign of beauty” (*subhanimitta*) gives rise to lust, while the “basis of samādhi” (*samādhinimitta*) is the four kinds of mindfulness meditation, i.e. the practices that lead to samādhi.

This has led some interpreters to overshoot the mark, alleging that the commentaries did not just change the *term*, but that they invented the very *idea* of the light seen in meditation. While the commentarial account obviously adds a lot of detail to the Suttas—which is, after all, the point of a commentary—we find in the EBTs that “lights” and “forms” are a normal aspect of the samādhi experience. Clearly these terms, which occur in many ways in many contexts, refer to the same kind of experience that modern Theravadins call *nimitta*.

kasiṇa: meditative totality

Modern Theravada, drawing on the *Visuddhimagga*, explains the *kasiṇa* as a physical disk that is used as a basis for beginning meditation. It may be a pure element, such as earth or water, or a bright and clear color.

The root meaning of the term *kasiṇa*, however, is “universal” or “totality” and in the EBTs it is always used in this way. It is a description of a state of *samādhi*, not an object used to gain *samādhi*.

The *kasiṇa* meditations were raised from their relative obscurity in the EBTs and placed at the start of the list of meditations as found in the *Abhidhamma*. This sequence, which was followed by the *Visuddhimagga*, seems to have contributed to the idea of the meditation “object”: something that you watch, but which itself is independent of the observer.

ekāyana: where all things come together as one

This term is found prominently in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, where it is given a wide range of interpretations by the commentary. It appears, however, that none of these readings—or the still further readings offered in Chinese texts—are cogent, since they apparently were not aware that the Buddha was using a brahmanical term with a specific sense.

The word *ekāyana* can be used in a variety of ways, but in a spiritual and philosophical sense it means “place of convergence”, where all things come together as one. This is the meaning here: the *satipaṭṭhānas* are the “basis of *samādhi*”, and their practice leads to the “convergence” of the mind in *jhāna*.

muta: that which is thought

There is a common sequence of phenomena in the EBTs: what is seen, heard, thought (*muta*), and cognized. From an early time in Theravada, and in many schools, *muta* was interpreted as meaning what is experienced by senses other than sight, sound, and cognition.

Muta is, however, the past participle of *maññati* (“thought”), and it always has this meaning in the EBTs.

This set of phenomena is derived from the Upanishads. And, as K.L. Jayatilleke has shown, they were meant, not as a comprehensive description of sense cognition, but as an analysis of the means of knowing, especially of spiritual teachings.

The meaning was retro-fitted by the Abhidhammikas to become an abbreviated expression of the six senses. The Abhidhamma is not concerned with responding to brahmins, but with making different Buddhist teachings fit together. This ends up shifting the focus and meaning of the passages in which they occur: the six senses focus on sensuality and overcoming desire, while the four including *muta* focus on the means of learning spiritual teachings and overcoming dogmatic views.

saṅkhāra: choices

In the EBTs we find the word *saṅkhāra* used in many senses, among which the following are the most doctrinally significant:

- volition or intention (i.e. kamma)
- conditioned phenomena (i.e. everything except for Nibbana)

Theravada acknowledges these two senses; for example, in the phrase “all *saṅkhāras* are impermanent” it means “conditioned phenomena”, while in dependent origination it means volition.

However, in the important context of the five aggregates, Theravada gives *saṅkhāra* a rather odd scope. There, it is said to mean “all conditioned phenomena apart from the things covered in the other aggregates”. Once more, this stems from an attempt to retro-fit the aggregates to suit the systematic needs of the Abhidhamma.

The aggregates were never intended to be a comprehensive classification of all phenomena; notably, the word “all” is used of the six senses, not the aggregates. Rather, the aggregates were a handy scheme for classifying theories of self. Some people took the self to be material, others to be a feeling, and so on, while others took it as a combination of these things.

Contemplation of the aggregates reveals that the various candidates for a self do not live up to the expectations we have for a self, as they inevitably change and fail to provide the satisfaction we crave.

Thus *saṅkhāra* in the five aggregates has the same meaning it does in dependent origination and elsewhere: volition. It is the identification of the self with the will: “I am the decider”. Nowhere do the EBTs suggest that the sense is broader than this.

In modern English, a morally relevant act of will is usually described as a “choice”. One can make good choices and bad choices, but not good volitions or bad volitions; and “good intentions” while idiomatic, has a rather different connotation.

the radiant mind

The Theravadin commentaries dabble with the idea that Nibbana may be understood as a form of transcendent consciousness or “radiant mind”. While the meaning and influence of these ideas within the commentarial tradition is debatable, it has become a common, indeed virtually standard, view in many parts of modern Theravada.

For the EBTs, on the other hand, consciousness of any form is suffering, and Nibbana is the cessation of suffering. The “radiant mind” and similar terms refer to *jhāna*.

Passages quoted in support of the transcendent consciousness thesis invariably end up cherry-picking a few passages of dubious interpretation, ignoring the vast mass of clear teachings on this topic.

rūpa kalāpas and the ultimate analysis of matter

The Theravada Abhidhamma focusses mainly on the analysis of mind, but it also goes into quite a lot of detail as to the nature of matter. The underlying physical realities of the elements, sense objects, and so on are specified, and are said to manifest in conglomerates (somewhat analogous to “molecules”) called *kalāpas*. The analysis is pursued with rigor and detail, occasionally informed by empirical observations—sound is slower than light, for when you see a man chopping wood in the distance, you can see an axe hitting a log before you hear the sound.

It is unclear to what extent these realities—or indeed any of the constituents of “ultimate reality”—were regarded as things

to be actually seen in meditation. Clearly the main focus was theoretical clarification and precision.

Most of these details are not found in the EBTs. While there are many points of similarity and congruence between matter as described by the Abhidhamma and that described by modern science, there are also many differences. In the Abhidhamma, for example, both “light” and “sound” are regarded as ultimately-existing realities. However, physics sees “light” as being photons, a kind of particle, while sound is waves of pressure in a medium, and has no specific underlying physical particle. Such distinctions, and many like them, are not found in Abhidhamma.

physical basis of mind

The Abhidhamma locates the physical basis for the mind in a tiny kalāpa of sensitive matter in the heart.

The EBTs speak of the interdependence of the mind and the body, but do not locate the mind in any particular organ. Consciousness is experienced in the whole body.

ti for tu

One of the first bits of Pali that you will hear is the *anumodanā* (“blessing”) chant by the monastics at the meal offering. These days we often use a Pali verbal form that ends in *-tu*. This is the imperative form, which conveys the sense, “may it be”. For example, *bhavatu sabbamaṅgalaṃ, rakkhantu sabbadevatā* “may you have all fortune, may the gods all protect you”. The sense is that the Saṅgha, by giving the *anumodanā*, grants a blessing to the lay community.

But these *anumodanā* verses are late. In the EBTs, the Buddha himself gave the *anumodanā*, and in these early forms we find, not the imperative *-tu* but the indicative *-ti*, conveying the sense “it is”. Such verses are concerned not with giving a blessing, but with teaching cause and effect. If *you* do this good deed of generosity, then the following *will happen*. Not because of the *anumodanā* given by the Sangha, but because of the power of your own good deeds.

*Aggasmim dānam dadatam
aggam puñnam pavaḍḍhati
Giving gifts to the best,
the best merit grows.*

The meaning of *anumodanā* is not “blessing” but “rejoicing after”. It acts as a reminder, when doing good, to be happy at the good deeds of oneself and others.

emphasis on transference of merits

One of the most popular practices in Theravada is the transference of merits to departed relatives when offering a meal to the Sangha (*pattidāna*).

Similar ideas are alluded to once or twice in the EBTs, but they were not a major part of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha emphasized that a happy afterlife was dependent on doing good while we have the chance, not on the acts done by our relatives after we die.

Such practices mostly benefit those who have stayed behind. They give the family a sense of purpose, and unite them in per-

forming a wholesome action at a time when they may be feeling lost or hopeless.

sangha

The code of conduct for Buddhist monastics is laid out in detail in a set of books called the Vinaya-piṭaka, which accompanies the Suttas. The Sangha of all schools has always looked to the Vinaya as its foundational document, and has preserved largely similar Vinayas in multiple languages.

Neither the EBTs nor Theravada use the word “Sangha” to refer to a spiritual community in general.

monastics and money

All of the Vinayas prohibit monks and nuns from using money. This was, in fact, the defining event of the Second Council, held 100 years after the Buddha, where the collecting and use of money was categorically rejected by the entire Sangha.

These days, the vast majority of monks and nuns within Theravada use money. Those who avoid using money are restricted to some small circles, usually in the forest traditions.

The mere use of money is, however, perhaps less significant than the use to which it is put. It is one thing to have a bit of cash for catching a bus or buying a book, and quite another to accumulate a large collection of antique cars. And it is quite possible

to technically keep the rules about money while holding sway over vast resources. But it is still the case that keeping the money rules wards off a large realm of temptation and corruption.

hierarchy

Modern Theravada is hierarchical, and has often adopted complex sets of titles, awards, and privileges, all of which make up a hierarchically-based system of power.

Nothing like this is found in the Vinaya. There are no titles, no badges awarded to those of sufficient seniority or achievements. The Buddha is simply referred to as *bhante*, as are the great disciples.

The Vinaya does not allow for the exercise of power by one monastic over another. In the Sangha, all are equal, and the only coercive power rests in the Sangha as a whole, when it acts in consensus and according to the Vinaya. Indeed, a junior monastic *should* disobey their elder if they are asked to do something contrary to the Dhamma and Vinaya.

state-appointed sangha officials

Different Theravada countries, while sharing the same canon and communion, have developed national systems of internal governance.

In Thailand, the governing council is appointed by the King, and then it appoints preceptors, who are the only Sangha members legally empowered to perform ordination.

No such system is found in the Vinaya. On the contrary, the role of kings is to support the Sangha, not control it. Ordination is performed by any qualified monastics.

abbots

Theravada monasteries are usually run effectively by the fiat of the abbot. This varies from place to place, but almost everywhere we find the abbot has final say.

There is no concept of an abbot in the Vinaya. Decisions are made by the Sangha as a whole in accordance with the Dhamma-Vinaya. Sangha officials may be delegated, with authority over their domain, but none who has authority over the domains of others.

The relationship to seniority is one of respect, not command. Obviously junior Sangha members are expected to listen to the advice and guidance of the seniors, and normally would follow that. However there is no expectation that they must always follow it, and no punishment or other consequences for disobedience.

nikāyas

Theravada countries have organized their monastic communities in various nikāyas, i.e. orders. (Note that this is a different sense of the word than the “nikāyas” of the Pali canon.) These are administrative bodies that manage monastery properties, organize education, facilitate ordinations, and the like. In some cases, certain nikāyas will not perform acts of the Sangha with those outside their own nikāya, who are considered to be of different communion (*saṃvāsa*).

There is no such organizational structure found in the EBTs. It is, of course, reasonable to expect that in modern times, with our more complex world, new administrative structures should be formed. However the idea that entire groups of other Sangha should be automatically excluded from performing acts of the Sangha is contrary to the letter and the spirit of the Vinaya. In the Vinaya, dividing or excluding Sangha is only permissible in cases where an individual or group has committed a grave offense and it is no longer possible to consider them as part of the same community.

In Sri Lanka, the mainstream Siam Nikaya performs ordination according to caste, which, it should hardly need saying, goes against everything the Buddha said on the topic of caste.

ordination lineages

Modern Buddhism of all schools, including Theravada, places great stock in the notion of ordination lineages, and the desire for a pure lineage underlies much of the shape of the modern Sangha.

The Vinaya contains no concept of an ordination lineage. Ordination into the Sangha is designed to facilitate proper support and education for the new student, and is not a quasi-magical initiation. No order of Sangha alive today can prove that its own ordination lineage is “valid” according to its own standards; the historical records simply don’t exist.

nuns

The Buddha established an order of fully-ordained nuns (*bhikkhunī*). Since around the 12th century, Theravada has lacked a universally accepted *bhikkhunī* order. Instead of the Buddha's vision of a spiritual role for women, a variety of other avenues have been developed. While these provide avenues for many women to practice the Dhamma, they do not enjoy the legitimacy of the *bhikkhunī* order or the governance of the Vinaya, and are carefully set up to ensure the subservience of women. This has led to a situation where some monks believe and act as if nuns are lesser, and assume they have power of command over them.

In the Vinaya, the *bhikkhunī* order is constituted as a fully-empowered and independent order, who undertook ordinations, teaching, practice, and institutional development. This remained the case during the 1500 years Buddhism thrived in India, and remains the case in places with a healthy *bhikkhunī* order.

patriarchy

Discussion of *bhikkhunīs* by Theravadin patriarchs focuses on the control offered to them by the so-called *garudhammas*, and argues for the illegitimacy of the ordination lineage of *bhikkhunīs*.

These arguments turn the purpose of Vinaya upside-down: Vinaya was established in order to support people to practice the Dhamma and seek liberation, not to prevent and undermine them. For such patriarchs, Vinaya has become, not a platform for liberation, but a means of entrenching privilege.

Research shows that the *garudhammas* were a later addition, and in their original form were probably established solely for

the Buddha's step-mother, due to her maternal pride in her son. The pride of the Sakyans is a byword in Buddhism, and special disciplinary measures were required for many of the Buddha's relatives: Devadatta, Upananda, Nanda, Channa.

Regardless of the historical situation, the garudhammas, even in their developed form, fall far short of justifying the control of nuns by monks, still less their extinction. The burden of the garudhammas is to set up relations of respect and support, not dominance and control.

ordination of bhikkhunīs by bhikkhus

The Pali Vinaya explicitly states that monks may ordain bhikkhunīs. This allowance was set up in the early days, when there were no senior nuns. Later, it was superseded in practice by the dual ordination by monks and nuns. However the original allowance was never suspended and remains in operation.

The central institutions of modern Theravada, however, do not follow this direct ruling by the Buddha, and hold that there is no valid way to ordain bhikkhunīs.

Having said which, it is important to remember that Theravadin communities are diverse, and there are many different views and practices within the monastic Sangha. There are many monks who reject the rulings of those in power.

believing women

The Vinaya deals with cases where a monk is accused of sexual misconduct by a trustworthy laywoman. In such cases, the monk should be dealt with according to the testimony of the woman,

in contrast with the usual situation where the monk's confession is required.

The Theravadin commentaries roll back this allowance, no longer trusting the laywoman's testimony. This was rejected by the then-Supreme Patriarch of Thai Buddhism, who in his *Vinaya-mukha*—a standard manual of Vinaya to this day—pointed out that it rendered moot the idea of a “trustworthy” laywoman.

There are many similar cases throughout the Vinaya, where rules intended for the protection of women are turned into rules discriminating against them. For example, the Vinaya says that a monk must not sexually grope a woman with a lustful mind. Modern Theravada holds that a monk, regardless of their mental state, can under no circumstances touch a woman.

sectarianism

Closely related to the notion of ordination lineage is the idea of sectarian purity. Theravada generally, and certain strands within Theravada in particular, place great weight on their own status as a pure, original representation of the teaching. This leads to the deprecation and dismissal of Sangha of other sects and traditions, who are sometimes seen as not really monastics, or even not really Buddhists.

For the Buddha, “purity” is internal, not external. It does not reside in a group identity, but in the pure-hearted practice of people. Once we identify purity with a sect, we immediately invite those of corrupt behavior to hide under the cloak of purity.

Within all sects and traditions of Buddhism, there are those who practice with sincerity and compassion, and those driven by greed and conceit. So long as we have the opportunity to let go of

the unwholesome and develop the wholesome, we can grow in the Dhamma wherever we are.

the noble persons as mind-moments

As well as referring to the monastic community, the Buddha used the word Sangha to refer to the community of enlightened disciples, i.e. the four persons on the paths and fruits.

In Theravada, these came to be understood as having the “ultimate” meaning of a few mind-moments: a flash of realization as one steps to a new level of the path.

In the EBTs, in line with the fact that the entire idea of mind-moments is not found, those on the path are clearly “persons” who are practicing a path, and who might, for example, sit down and eat a meal.

The contradiction on this point between the Suttas and the commentaries is so clear that it was, for me, the defining issue that made me realize I could not always trust the commentaries. Previously, I had been convinced of the essential correctness of the commentarial perspective, but this was impossible to sustain once I studied the relevant Sutta passages, which are many and definitive.

This change was hard for me to accept; it’s never easy to admit when you’re wrong, and it’s also not easy to step out from the comforting shelter of orthodoxy. But ultimately it gave me strength, because I realized that the tradition was not a set of dogmas that I had to adhere to, but a living conversation that I was a part of.

Let’s aspire to leave our tradition healthier than we found it. Mere preservation is not enough. Each one of us, regardless of

what school, tradition, or religion we adhere to, is swimming in the great stream of the Buddha's teachings. We all belong here. The Buddha offered his teaching to all of us so that we may be free.

